Birds on the Line, South Loop, Chicago, 2008, KC Clarke

What Is One Supposed to Do with Poems?
An Entry Point into *The Groaning Book*

What is one supposed to do with poems? The question sounds helpless, almost comic, as if someone has handed over a small animal wrapped in a towel and left. The poem sits there. It has lines, music, maybe a speaker, maybe a shape of thought, maybe no obvious use at all. One can admire it politely, misunderstand it confidently, explain it too soon, save it for later, talk around it, or close the book and feel vaguely accused by it.

One answer arrives as a joke that is also true: punish them. Make the poems stand trial. Make them explain themselves. Make them prove their usefulness, their innocence, their moral position, their permissions, their biography, their clarity. Make them safe enough to be understood before they have had the chance to be heard.

Poems are punished all the time for behaving like poems. They move by rhythm, image, hesitation, pressure, silence, and return, while readers often approach them with instruments built for argument. A poem arrives, and someone wants a statement. A poem offers weather, and someone wants a report. A poem carries a voice, and someone wants a confession. A poem withholds resolution, and someone demands legibility.

A better answer to the question of what to do with poems begins with attention, though attention is easy to confuse with approval. Publication is attention. A review is attention. A critic giving serious time to a book is attention. A press choosing a manuscript, an editor making space in a journal, a poetry center making the invitation to read, a teacher placing a poem before students, a reader carrying a line into private memory: all of these move poems into shared life. They give the work passage beyond the poet.

But attention also begins before external approval. A poet can return to the work with discipline, curiosity, and pressure. Read the poems aloud. Listen to them. Ask what they keep doing across years. Follow their rhythms. Notice what they refuse. Build a poetics from the practice that made them. Sequence them until hidden structures appear. Place them beside music, painting, weather, memory, theory, or civic space. Let the poems become available to thought before anyone else has paid any attention at all.

Outside attention gives poems passage. Internal attention gives poems depth. Publication, reviews, editors, presses, and readers can help a poem travel. The mistake is allowing that passage to become the condition for seriousness. A poem's first field of attention can begin in the artist's own sustained return to the work.

This is one hidden key to *Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate* and *The Groaning Book*: the book can be read as a record of actions, not only as a collection and its companion poetics. It reads poems one by one. It listens for their rhythms. It tests them against fear. It places them beside music and modern art. It traces masks, identities, refusals, civic histories, and sonic structures. It uses tools in proportion to the work. It treats poems as things that can be sounded, studied, arranged, tested, and carried into forms of attention beyond the page.

The Groaning Book offers its answer by moving from attention into practice. It begins close to the poems, passes through fear, and turns outward toward sound, structure, tools, and public placement.

One thing to do with poems is read them one by one. That sounds obvious, but poems ask for a kind of patience the culture rarely gives them. The first failure is often simpler than misreading, argument, or interpretation. The poem is passed over. It is not read. If poems are read at all, they are often hurried toward the shortcut: the category, the thesis, the authorial credential, the useful summary. A poem-by-poem reading stays near the work. It asks what each poem is doing in the field of the collection. It listens for pressure, placement, tonal behavior, and compositional force. It allows a poem to have its own weather before making it serve the climate report.

That kind of reading becomes accompaniment. The poem is neither solved nor abandoned. Its images are allowed to gather force by relation. Its sound is allowed to shape meaning before paraphrase takes over. Its position in the collection becomes part

of its behavior. What came before it changes how it sounds. What follows it gives the earlier pressure another contour.

Another thing to do with poems is build a poetics from them. This should be ordinary. Painters study their canvases. Composers write about their methods. Filmmakers keep notebooks, diagrams, storyboards, manifestos, interviews, and production essays. Visual artists often build entire practices around process, material, statement, installation, and context. Poets often wait for the familiar ritual: a journal chooses the poem, a press chooses the manuscript, a critic notices the book, a prize places a medal on the work. Only then are the poems permitted to have weight. That ritual can make poets timid before their own art, as though thinking seriously about the practice that made the poems were an act of vanity rather than a form of criticism.

A poetics written from one's own poems is inquiry, not self-review. What pressures shaped these poems? What rhythms do they trust? What kinds of clarity do they resist? What silences do they sustain? What did the poems know before the poet had language for the knowledge? The poet returns to the work and begins to see what the work has been showing all along.

The act can begin before any kind of external acknowledgment is given. A poet can build a small poetics around five poems, a notebook, a sequence, a reading, a set of recordings, a table of recurring images, a few pages on sound. The scale can be modest and still serious. *The Groaning Book* is a large version of the act, but the act itself is available to any poet willing to give the work sustained attention.

Another thing to do with poems is act in proportion to the fear of consequence. Poems enter rooms where they can be mishandled. The poet can fear accusation, embarrassment, dismissal, silence, indifference, exposure, or being read with a violence disguised as righteousness. Readers can fear ambiguity. Workshops can fear harm. Institutions can fear illegibility. The fear is real. The question is what happens when fear begins to organize the whole response.

The Groaning Book names this danger The Law of Moral Recursion: the pattern by which fear, even fear born from real injury, begins to repeat the harm it means to oppose. When fear organizes the whole moral response, protection hardens into control. Suspicion becomes proof of loyalty. The wish to guard the vulnerable can become a hunger to accuse. The counterforce is proportion: restraint under pressure, humility inside conviction, the discipline to remember without reenacting.

Poetry needs that proportion. A reader afraid of ambiguity may demand instant clarity. A workshop afraid of harm may demand confession, identity, permission, and declared intent. A poet afraid of being misread may explain too soon, soften the voltage, remove

the dangerous weather, or make the poem announce its virtue before its music has found form. Fear begins writing from outside the poem.

Proportion offers another practice. Read more slowly. Listen longer. Delay judgment. Let ambiguity remain active. Ask what the poem is doing before demanding what it is saying. Let the poem stay strange long enough for its own form of legibility to emerge.

"Lightning Manual" turns that practice into instruction. The poem tells the reader to sit at the window, study the flashes, learn them well, seek open fields, retrieve the ladder, dream of being struck, sit in the branches of an isolated tree, and pray for a storm. As literal safety advice, it is deranged. As a reading manual, it is close to exact.

The poem begins by looking. The storm is distant enough to study, but close enough to call. Attention does not make the danger safe. It makes the danger legible. By the time the figure sits in the isolated tree and prays for a storm, risk has become a form of reading.

That is one thing to do with poems. Study the flashes. Learn them well. Prepare for the charge without pretending the charge is safe.

Another thing to do with poems is listen until the self gets out of the way. In *The Groaning Book*, the reVerse section grows from a recording project: get a recorder, read the poem aloud, listen back, do it again. Keep listening until the embarrassment of your own voice gives way to the poem's presence. Read until you hear the poem, not your performance of it. Read until the poem begins reading you.

That advice carries a poetics of sound. Poems are made of breath, duration, stress, turn, silence, and recurrence. A line can look finished on the page and reveal its false note when read aloud. Another line may seem plain until the voice discovers its pressure. Recording returns the poem to the body while giving the poet enough distance to hear structure.

Host the reading in a garage. Use the rooftop, the library basement, the classroom after hours, the back room of a bar. A poem does not need a stage to become audible. It needs a space shaped by attention, voices willing to test a line, and people willing to listen. In that room, someone may discover that a line can break where breath breaks, and that language can follow sound rather than obedience.

Another thing to do with poems is map them. A collection may carry a hidden structure the poet felt before naming it: contraction, drift, density, rupture, suspension, release. Charts and diagrams can flatten art when used as verdicts, but they can also point back toward motion. A map can reveal the waveform a collection has been making under the surface.

This is where tools enter by proportion. A recorder can reveal sound. A language model can serve as a pressure chamber, a tireless listener for recurrence, rhythm, and structure. A broadside can give the poem visual presence. A gallery wall can change the act of reading. A classroom can make a poem communal. A tool matters when it gives the poem another form of attention. The poem remains the measure, and the work returns to the person reading, hearing, or carrying it.

A single poem can be read, sounded, carried, memorized, and placed. A collection can be studied as architecture. It can be sounded like a score. It can be walked like a field. It can be mapped like weather.

Another thing to do with poems is place them in civic space. Civic poetics treats placement as a poetic act. Sometimes that placement happens through a poetry center, a classroom, a journal, a gallery, an archive, or a press. Sometimes it happens through a reading, a broadside, a recording, a chapbook, or a self-published book. The form does not need permission to be serious. It needs attention.

Placement differs from promotion. Promotion asks the poem to advertise itself. Placement asks what form the poem might take in shared life. A poem in a school hallway does different work than the same poem hidden in a file. Read aloud, it enters memory through bodies. Printed as a broadside, it becomes visual, spatial, held. Placed in civic life, it becomes part of the architecture of attention around a place.

Aftersound is what remains after those acts have done their work. The poem enters the machine and returns as friction. It enters the recorder and returns as breath. It enters the classroom and returns as permission. It enters the broadside and returns as image. It enters the gallery and returns as public space.

That is finally what one is supposed to do with poems. Give them attention before approval arrives. Read them one by one. Let them accumulate. Develop a poetics from them. Act in proportion to fear. Study their flashes. Sound them aloud. Record them until the poem takes over. Map the collection when the map returns you to rhythm. Place poems beside music, painting, theory, weather, and memory. Organize the reading. Print a chapbook. Make the broadside. Carry the poem into shared space. Return to it after the first reading has failed to exhaust it.

Do something with them.

Lightning Manual

If your city is the meeting place
of three rivers
and legends say

there will be no great storm,
sit at your bedroom window
and study the flashes

contained in a wall of clouds to the north
that behave like the chemical signals
of fireflies. Learn it well.

Seek open fields, fish for bluegill, hang from a clothesline,
walk railroad tracks under overhead wires,
retrieve the ladder in your garage, fly a kite

and prepare for the blue electric flash that will
blister your nipples and lips, make your
wedding band glow white, orange.

If lightning is far off dream of being struck.
Sit in the branches of an isolated tree
and pray for a storm.

About the Author:
KC Clarke is the author of *Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate* & *The Groaning Book: A Poetics* and *Wolves and Flax: The Prior Family and the Cuyahoga Valley Wilderness*. His professional life has moved through literary centers, museums, libraries, and nonprofit institutions, with work in publishing, public programming, exhibitions, and creative direction for numerous books. His writing is shaped by the civic and cultural infrastructure this essay describes: the shared places where poems are read, heard, held, and carried forward. "Lightning Manual," appears in *Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate* & *The Groaning Book: A Poetics*.